THE ROLE OF EPISTEMIC COMMUNITIES IN OFFERING NEW COOPERATION FRAMEWORKS IN THE EUPHRATES-TIGRIS RIVERS SYSTEM

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The Euphrates-Tigris region has faced significant political changes since the late 1990s. These changes can be attributed to improvements in bilateral relations, mainly in the security domain, between two of its major riparians, Turkey and Syria. In the meantime, another major riparian, Iraq, has lived through devastating war and occupation, which has had implications for regional water issues. These changes have brought new actors, involved or interested in the hydropolitics of the two-river basin, to the region.

This article will analyze the politics of water resources in the Euphrates-Tigris River basin, focusing on current developments. But first, an overview of past events is deemed necessary to evaluate, in the proper context, the current situation in the basin. Historical research has traced the opportunities for more interactions in the river basin with broader aims for socioeconomic development, in addition to the limited goal of watersharing.

In this respect, one significant development in the region is the Euphrates-Tigris Initiative for Cooperation (ETIC) established in May 2005 by a group of scholars and professionals from the three major riparian countries.[1] The overall goal of the initiative is to promote cooperation among the three riparians to achieve technical, social and economic development in the Euphrates-Tigris River basin. The composition and the role of ETIC remarkably fits the epistemic community theory and its role in institutional bargaining. Epistemic communities are a "network of professionals with recognized expertise and competence in a particular domain and an authoritative claim to policy-relevant knowledge within that domain or issue-area."[2] This article will introduce the origin, objectives and activities of ETIC within the epistemic community theory with particular references to new areas of cooperation in the basin.

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Euphrates-Tigris Rivers System: Political Geography

The Euphrates-Tigris River basin comprises Iraq, Syria and Turkey as the major riparians.[3] The two greatest rivers of southwest Asia, the Euphrates and the Tigris, originate in a particular topographic and climatic zone and end up in quite a different one. The basin is characterized by high mountains to the north and to the west, and extensive lowlands in the south and in the east. The two rivers begin, scarcely 30 kilometers from each other, in a relatively cool and humid zone with rugged 3,000 meter-high mountains, and are visited by autumn and spring rains and winter snows. From there, the two rivers run separately onto a wide, flat, hot and poorly drained plain. In their middle courses, they diverge hundreds of kilometers apart, yet meet again near the end of their journey in the Shatt al-Arab, and discharge together into the Persian Gulf. The great alluvium-filled depression, Shatt al-Arab, and the combined area of the lakes and swamps have a length of 180 kilometers and constitute the combined delta of the Euphrates-Tigris River basin.[4]

We observe, in conformity with the expert judgments of geographers, that the Euphrates and the Tigris rivers are considered to form one single transboundary watercourse system.[5] They are linked not only by their natural course when merging at the Shatt-al-Arab, but also as a result of the man-made Tharthar Canal connection between the two rivers in Iraq.[6]

In the upstream region, the Euphrates and Tigris pass through a Mediterranean subtropical climate characterized by rainy winters and dry, warm summers. This climate prevails in southeastern Turkey, as well as in northern Syria and Iraq. However, the two rivers flow through semi-arid and arid regions within Syria and Iraq, since 60 percent of the Syrian territory receives less than 250 millimeters of precipitation while 70 percent of Iraq is subject to 400 millimeters per year. Another important climatic feature in the Euphrates-Tigris River basin is the high temperature resulting in high evaporation. Heavy evaporation also reinforces water salination and water loss in major reservoirs like the Keban and Atatürk Dams in Turkey, the Assad Reservoir or Tabqa Dam in Syria, and Lake Habbaniya and the Tharthar Canal in Iraq.[7]

The discharge, or flow, of the Euphrates and Tigris is still a matter of dispute among scholars and experts. This is not only because the flow patterns have shown great deviations, which impede the computation of a representative average discharge value, but the rapid development on both rivers, which has disrupted the natural flow, has also created difficulties for hydrologists to determine the discharge values.[8] In addition to this, the lack of mutual trust and confidence inhibits the riparians of the basin from releasing the necessary data and information relevant to rainfall and runoff. Analysts have concluded that the annual mean flow of the Euphrates, 32 billion cubic meters per year, is a valid value.[9] Approximately 90 percent of the mean flow of the Euphrates is contributed by Turkey; the remaining 10 percent originates